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The Invisible Foe

New Intelligence Push Attempts to Wipe Out Vietcong Underground

Elite Forces Work to Break The Enemy 'Infrastructure' By Eliminating Leaders

Night Raids Set Up by CIA

By PETER R. KANN

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

SAIGON—An American official boasts that he duped a rural Vietcong group into assassinating one of its own key agents by elaborately sowing rumors in VC circles that the man was a double agent working for the allies.

In a province near the Cambodian border, allied intelligence discloses the planned time and location of a VC district finance committee meeting. Sweeping into the gathering, a special combat police unit captures six VC tax officials.

In a Mekong Delta province, U.S. officials learn that funeral rites are planned for a senior VC official. An allied "counter-terror" team raids the funeral and kills many of the VC agents present.

Can the visible and legal government of South Vietnam root out the "invisible" government, the clandestine, 80,000-member Vietcong "infrastructure"? A new effort is under way to do so. There is general agreement here that the outcome of the struggle will be crucial to the future of the nation.

Working Quietly

Officially described by U.S. authorities as the "political and administrative organization through which the Vietcong control or seek control over the South Vietnamese people," the infrastructure, or VCI, is an efficient, largely covert organization with decades of experience in moving among the people. Taking advantage of family relationships and the weak grip of the established government in remote areas, it conducts espionage, wields terror, infiltrates allied organizations, collects taxes, disseminates propaganda and recruits natives for its cause.

For years allied agencies and programs have sought to root out the VCI, with meager success. Now the U.S. and the Vietnamese government are mounting another high-priority program to coordinate their agencies and accomplish that task. Called Phung Hoang (All-Seeing Bird) in Vietnamese, the program is known to Americans as Phoenix.

...to register some successes, despite disinterest among some Vietnamese officials, political infighting and skepticism among U.S. aides. "It's a good program," says one informed source, "but we should have started it six years ago." One observer compares the program to "trying to root the Republican party out of Kansas."

The effort is imperative, however. If the Paris peace talks produce a cease-fire, it is unlikely that VCI activities could be turned off with the same ease as conventional military action. The VCI might continue as a covert political apparatus, even if the Vietcong won a role in a new government.

Getting Together

U.S. intelligence officials define Phoenix as "a systematic effort at intelligence coordination and exploitation." Before Phoenix, they found that in one district 11 networks of allied intelligence agents were operating independently. Some observers suggested that the district contained more paid informers and agents for the allied side than there were VC regulars to spy on.

The Vietnamese government's three major intelligence agencies—Police Special Branch, Military Security Service and Army Intelligence—all were at work in the district, and not productively. Competing agencies regularly arrested one another's agents, accidentally or because of political rivalries.

Phoenix works to pool the resources and information of the various agencies, with joint intelligence committees at the province level and also down at the district level. American advisers, including Central Intelligence Agency men, participate in the effort to sift information from agents, informers, prisoners and other sources. "Exploitation" is accomplished by military or paramilitary units that make secret, small-unit missions into contested or Vietcong-controlled areas, usually at night.

These units prefer to capture an identified VCI agent, since he may yield further information, but if that is impractical, the target is assassinated, sometimes brutally as an object lesson to others. "It's a systematic, sophisticated application of force," says one American adviser in the field. In big cities and other government-controlled areas, however, the program may involve a simple arrest rather than a kidnapping or assassination.

What happened to previous "counter-infrastructure" programs? Combined with various "pacification" efforts, they were pushed into the background as the overt military conflict escalated and the "other war" effort languished. Moreover, pacification is a catchall program; the complex task of tracking down VCI cadre didn't mesh well with agricultural aid and school-building.

A U.S. field official (who belatedly discovered that his cook was a VC agent) points out a perennial problem. "Face it," he says, "we really can't tell who is VCI and who isn't. The GVN (Government of Vietnam) has to do this job." Some U.S. officials believe that Vietnamese leaders still don't realize the importance of coming to grips with the VCI—or that they despair of destroying it.

The Yanks Are for It

The Phoenix program seems to have stirred

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being reported. In one province near Saigon, pooling of intelligence in the past two months has produced the capture or assassination of six members of the VC province committee, three VC district chiefs, nine other VC district officials and 31 village or hamlet cadre. Trained cadre, particularly senior ones at the province level, are difficult for the VC to replace.

In a province north of Saigon, Phoenix is credited with 145 VCI captives and casualties in June. Earlier this year, when the program hadn't gained momentum, the usual toll was about 20 a month.

In one province near the Demilitarized Zone, Phoenix is reported to have been so successful that the enemy has had to replace local VCI cadre with North Vietnamese; the agents from the North necessarily would have less rapport with the natives than their native-born predecessors. In another northern province of South Vietnam, the VC are said to have formed a special committee to try to rebuild their shattered apparatus.

Nationally, some 6,000 VCI cadre have been captured or killed since the Tet holiday in February, according to allied sources. Still, says one informed source, "We're kidding ourselves if we think we've hurt them much yet."

Indeed, in many provinces Phoenix remains largely a paper project. In one central highlands province, there are two provincial intelligence committees, neither one of them functioning. The program is paralyzed by competition between the province chief and the province police chief.

At the district level in the same province, the situation is no better. "We have three DIOCs (District Intelligence and Operations Centers) in the province," says one source. "One shows signs of promise. One is headed by an incompetent. The third is headed by a suspected VC."

Mutual distrust among intelligence agencies remains a problem. "Partly it's endemic among intelligence agencies in any country," says one American source. "Intelligence agencies are by nature exclusive. They don't want to reveal their sources. We have the problem, too." In Vietnam, the problem is compounded by personal political rivalries and the conspiratorial nature of Vietnamese.

Keeping It From the Enemy

Also, the Vietcong have been skillful at permeating many of the government's intelligence agencies. Thus, while American agencies seek to have the government share its secrets, it is questionable if the Americans share their own best information.

Another difficulty: Vietnamese intelligence agencies traditionally have been instruments of internal military and political intrigue, particularly in the days when the late President

Diem's brother-in-law, Ngo Dinh Nhu, headed the police apparatus. But Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the national police until he was wounded a few months ago, also was a master intriguer. Political involvements don't make for efficient intelligence work.

Because of incompetence or indifference among many regular Vietnamese military units in carrying out "exploitation" missions, U.S. advisers recently have been relying on "PRUs" (Provincial Reconnaissance Units) of 18 men each to make strikes on VCI targets.

The PRUs are more American than Vietnamese. Chosen, trained, paid and operated by the CIA, they are highly trained mercenaries, often selected from Vietnam's minority groups, such as Chinese Nungs and Cambodians, or from Vietcong agents who have defected. Their operations often are led by elite U.S. Navy "Seal" commandos assigned to the CIA.

The PRUs have been an effective strike force, but the most logical exploitation force would be native units such as Popular Force troops—platoon-sized groups recruited and employed at the village level. These troops know their localities and often know the identities of VCI agents. But the PF troops long have been the most poorly trained, equipped and led Vietnamese units. And many district officials, envisaging harsh VC reprisals to exploitation strikes, would just as soon have the strikes made by outside forces like the PRUs.

Indeed, some veteran U.S. officials fault the American effort for naively failing to take local complexities into account. Many U.S. advisers are youthful Army lieutenants or captains, and others also lack experience. One arriving colonel, having received a long briefing on the "counter-infrastructure program," is said to have asked, "Where is this structure, anyway?"

Some officials in the field complain of demands from Saigon for numerical results ("How many VCI did you kill this month?"). They argue that the pressure for "results" leads to strikes against low-level VCI rather than the key, elusive officials in the enemy apparatus. However, a senior official in Saigon says, "We are interested in quality, not quantity. We want the hard-core cadre."

A few veteran officials complain that the counter-infrastructure effort isn't being pursued with enough subtlety. Rather than capturing or killing VCI cadre, they say, Phoenix should focus on the use of secret agents to infiltrate VCI cells and turn them against one another. Some success has been reported in such enterprises.

Another source suggests that to root out the VCI the allies will have to develop their own clandestine "counter-infrastructure"—a permanent presence rivaling and eventually overcoming that of the VC in contested and VC-controlled areas.